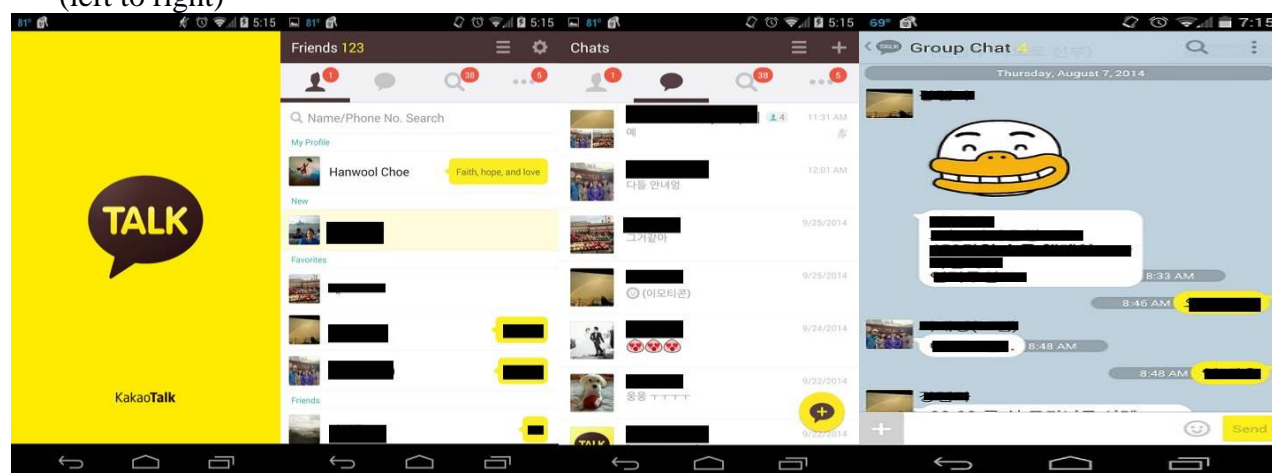


Ah...Ah! An exploration of the Korean discourse marker 아 (Ah) in Instant Messages (IM) Hanwool Choe Georgetown University

1.0 Introduction

Social media such as Instant Messages (IM), enable individuals to connect each other beyond time and space. Along with the popularity of social media, Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) research has also been proliferating rapidly. Although people use IM as the easiest and fastest means of daily interaction with others, the lack of intonation and paralinguistic contours, due to the absence of physical co-presence, seems to limit the degree/depth of communication in IM. As part of such concerns, this study investigates how users of a Korean free texting application, KakaoTalk messenger, use the Korean discourse marker, 아 (Ah), in IM. KakaoTalk is the most popular and common IM messenger among Koreans who own smartphones (Frier, 2013). According to KakaoTalk website (www.kakao.com/talk), people can chat one-on-one, or with an unlimited number of friends via KakaoTalk. The image (1) helps to visualize what KakaoTalk looks like.

(1) Screenshots of KakaoTalk, its friends list, chat rooms list, and a group chat room
(left to right)



2.0 Previous Studies

According to Baron and Ling (2011), however, punctuation in CMC can mirror an oral tone to the messages. Bieswanger (2013) also claims that such a paucity of paralinguistic and phonological elements can re-shape certain features of language use.

Along with those perspectives, now let's take a look at the Korean discourse marker, 아 (Ah). Korean linguists have traditionally viewed 아 (Ah) as an exclamation which has multiple meanings (Nam & Koh 1985, Shin 2001). The following shows the meanings and functions of Ah (Kang 2005, Kim 2005, Ahn 2012).

(2) Meanings of ㅇㅏ (*Ah*)

- Surprise (with rising tone)
- Acknowledgement/Agreement (with falling tone)
- Realization (with prolonged sound)
- Momentary Recognition (with short and strong accent)

(3) Functions of ㅇㅏ (*Ah*)

- To initiate/change topic
- To signal attention
- To fill the space before the next utterance
- To interrupt
- To get the floor
- To show listenership

As above, the way in which ㅇㅏ (*Ah*) is said might affect its meaning (Kim 2005). However, it is hard to associate its functions with particular intonation because the functions are more context-based. For example, when ㅇㅏ (*Ah*) is used to interrupt, the meaning of that interruption ㅇㅏ (*Ah*) can mean one of the above meanings.

Schiffrin (1987) explores the specific conditions to be used as a discourse marker in English-based spoken communication. (p. 328):

- A discourse marker has to be syntactically detachable from a sentence
- A discourse marker has to be commonly used in initial position of an utterance
- A discourse marker has to have a range of prosodic contours e.g. tonic stress and followed by a pause, phonological reduction
- A discourse marker has to be able to operate at both local and global levels of discourse, and on different planes of discourse. This means that it either has to have no meaning, a vague meaning, or to be reflexive (of the language, of the speaker)

In written digital communication such as IM, the inability to vocalize ㅇㅏ (*Ah*) is a hindrance to expressing rising/falling tone, stress, and length. Additionally, written digital communication has a possibility to reinvent the discourse marker's conditions, argued by Schiffrin, which are based on spoken communication. In this investigation, I highlight the ways in which users of IM indicate a specific meaning of *Ah* in their messages and meet the above conditions. Although given contexts can help to disambiguate the meaning of ㅇㅏ (*Ah*), I argue that a variety of supports such as punctuation, Korean letters as pictograms, and repetition can further serve as intonation substitutes and meaning indicators to enhance contextual information and that the discourse marker, ㅇㅏ (*Ah*), in writing still follows the spoken-based discourse marker conditions.

3.0 Data Analysis

For data analysis, I focus how these women represented the intonation contours and other paralinguistic phenomena of ㅇㅏ (*Ah*), following the guidance of ㅇㅏ (*Ah*)'s pragmatic meanings and functions (Kang 2005, Kim 2005, Ahn 2012) and Schiffrin's (1987) discourse marker conditions.

I qualitatively analyzed 229 occurrences of ㅇㅏ (*Ah*) in 8,075 IM written by a group of five Korean female friends (Amy, Hannah, Monica, Phoebe, and Rachel) between August, 2013 and April, 2014. They are in their mid-20s. Three of them (Amy, Hannah, and Phoebe) are from Seoul, the capital of South Korea, and the other (Rachel) is from Daegu, the capital and principal

city in Gyeongsangbuk-do province. All of them use standard written Korean in instant messaging. Since they are currently studying abroad to graduate schools in U.S., KakaoTalk is their major means of daily communication to each other.

Findings are as follows – ellipsis and Korean letters as pictograms, ㅠ ㅠ¹, are used to make a falling tone. Question marks in a question form and Korean letters as pictograms, ㅋ ㅋ², to mark laughter, are used as a rising tone. Repetition is marked as prolonged sound and exclamation marks are employed to show short and strong accent. The discourse marker, 아 (Ah), appears alone only when the females received new information. The marker, 아 (Ah), is sometimes located in the middle of the sentence, which is against one of the conditions, claimed by Schiffrin (1987), that a discourse marker has to commonly come at the beginning of an utterance. I argue this abnormal position of the marker results from asynchronicity in CMC (see Herring 2001 and Werry 1996).

As shown in (4), in line 1, “Studying it as minor would be good for me”, Rachel explains the reason she chose Second Language Acquisition as her minor, following a question by Phoebe. In line 2, “Ahahah I got you That is good ^^”, the marker, Ah is placed at the initial position of the message and Phoebe reduplicates Ah three times. Even if the marker is detached from the sentence, it will not affect the sentence syntactically. In this example, reduplication of Ah has the equivalent of lengthening the sound and displays Phoebe’s realization of new information from Rachel’s previous message. Also, her use of smiley face emoticon (^^) implies her positive evaluation of Rachel’s choice. In (5), Monica responds “Ah...I see” in line 2 to Hannah’s message in line 1, “May 10th will be my last day of school”. Like in (4) and in spoken discourse markers, in Monica’s response, Ah is located at the initial place of the message and will not cause any syntactic change, even if detached. Monica employs ellipsis as an intonation indicator to make a falling tone of Ah to acknowledge Hannah’s school schedule. As shown in (4) and (5), reduplication and ellipsis are used as written sonic effects to identify the intonation aspect of 아 (Ah) in written discourse.

(4)

- | | | | |
|---|-----------------------|--------|--|
| 1 | Jan 28, 2014, 9:06 PM | Rachel | 부전공을 그쪽으로 해두는게 좋을 것 같아요 : Studying it as minor would be good for me |
| 2 | Jan 28, 2014, 9:07 PM | Phoebe | 아아아 그렇구나 좋다 ^^ : Ahahah I got you That is good ^^ |

¹ One of Korean vowels, ㅠ [yu in English] indicates a crying face because it looks like tears coming out of an eye, which is semantically equivalent to a western style crying emoticon, :(, which consists of a colon for eyes, an apostrophe for a tear, and a left parenthesis for a sad mouth. Koreans widely use it in pair such as ㅠ ㅠ

² One of Korean consonants, ㅋ [k in English], is used as laughter due to its sound in Korean Instant Messages, is equivalent to lol (an English acronym for laugh out loud) regardless of the number of ㅋ typed like ㅋ, ㅋ ㅋ ㅋ ㅋ.

(5)

- 1 Feb 8, 2014, 6:23 PM Hannah 5 월 10 일 이 종강 일 이야
: May 10th will be my last day of school
- 2 Feb 8, 2014, 6:24 PM Monica 아...그렇구나
: Ah...I see

4.0 Conclusions

My study suggests that intonation still plays a key role in articulating the meaning of the content in written discourse, that intonation can be described in written form and that the features of the spoken discourse markers are also applied to CMC like IM. Moreover, this investigation contributes to the research of discourse markers, which is generally based on spoken discourse, by associating non-sonic phenomena with the representation of discourse markers in written discourse.

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